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We Alchemists: Playing with Pain, Power, and Potential

Lisa Dumas Neufeld

PART I of 3

“The meeting of two personalities is like the contact of two chemical substances; if there is any reaction, both are transformed.” (Jung, 1933)

He was a short man, but not a small one. He had long gray hair and walked around bare-foot. On Saturday mornings, he would meet me there, smiling, in the hallway. He would offer expired yogurt, vanilla wafers, and half-frozen 2% milk. I was seven or eight months pregnant, unwed, and living on government welfare in inner-city, subsidized housing. I had dropped out of school over and over and over. We would share ideas and cigarettes and too-sweet coffees and analyze the state of society. He would also mark my work, help me with any problems I was having, and give me modules and novels for the next week. Under his tutelage, I graduated from high school with honors.

I had also graduated from the School of Riskiness with honors. I grew and lived in a Realm of Risk—an environment, a system of patterns and practices that put me at risk. At risk of what? At risk of dropping out, at risk of harming myself or others, at risk of disengaging from society, at risk of addiction, mental illness, dis-ease, violence, crime, and/or poverty. These are the risks of the Realm, and they are cancerous and progressive. If an individual continues to grow and settle into a system like this without intervention (from within or without), a graduation will occur. The lifestyle and the internal and external patterns and practices that support it are normalized, habituated, and even calcified. As a person grows roots within this system, they become trapped in increasingly destructive cycles, cycles that disconnect them from themselves, others, and the possibility of health.

Despite this, change is possible. By tapping into resilience and readiness, people trapped in destructive cycles can transform. Through access to resources and supportive relationships, a process of total reconstruction can occur. I have lived it, and I will share what I have learned, offering a framework of sorts. I have spiced this article with ideas, theories, and stories that have helped me make meaning of my own experiences, hoping that they will help you in your life’s work.

From Destructive to Productive

By age eighteen, I was trapped in a cycle of poverty, irresponsibility, and trauma. I was disconnected and destructive. I was transitioning out of foster care, and I was pregnant, unwed, and uneducated. I had dropped out of school time and time again, not due to inability or a lack of intelligence, but due to turbulent external circumstances and serious internal battles. I existed in crisis mode. I never lived anywhere or sat in silence long enough to really connect to myself, to others, to school content, or to the adults around me. The primary relationships I did have were centered around risky activities and fakery.

Dr. Douglas P. Newton (2017) has stated that by age five many of our beliefs and subconscious patterns are hard-wired. By age five I had experienced many adverse childhood experiences first- and second-hand. My patterns were defunct. It has been said that as a very young child, I would fly into fits of rage, or into a pile of tears on a dime. Then, I would hungrily seek affection and acknowledgement. According to Newton, there is an internal system by which we assess if a person or situation is a threat or a benefit to our well-being. Based on our assessment, we either 1) avoid threats or 2) move toward that which benefits us. Like many people who live in the Realm of Risk, my system was short-circuited, and I was malfunctioning. As I grew, I moved toward destructive situations, people, and experiences—even seeking them out. My programming attracted me to risk. I was seeped in it, just like many of the people with whom we work.

By twenty-one years of age, I’d moved twenty-one times, mostly between the ages of fifteen and nineteen. While other youngsters were playing baseball, I was moving from place to place, playing with dragons, and living with my belongings in garbage bags. While young ladies were planning their graduation celebrations and standing on the stage receiving their diplomas, I was planning for the birth of my son and standing in welfare lines. As young adults were going to university orientations with their parents, I was single-parenting my son, thawing frozen 2% milk, and trying to get my life together.

Over the next ten years, a transformation occurred. By the time I was thirty-one years old, I was on a healing journey, living in a stable home with my son, learning, and sharing what I had graciously been taught. I was walking across the stage at the

University of Winnipeg with a degree in Education. For five years, I had been working towards a childhood dream of becoming a teacher—one I had forgotten in my travels and tribulations. I had found ACCESS, a gracious program of “second (or eighth) chances” as Phil Baker puts it. I was transmuting my pain into power.

The Pain, the Power, and the Reality

Pain has been defined as suffering, but it is also related to making an effort (i.e., one takes pains to do something). Power is the ability to produce an effect. Efficacy is derived from the Latin *efficax* which means powerful, effectual, and efficient. There are two efficacy cycles simultaneously at play within people, although at times one is more dominant than the other. When they live within a Productive Efficacy Cycle, their behaviour connects them with themselves, others, nature, and the community. The result is productive—it produces connection and leads to a healthy sharing, naturally. The fruit that falls from the tree of a productive cycle is rich and nourishing to others. When they are living within a Destructive Efficacy Cycle, their behaviour disconnects them from themselves, others, and the community. This fruit is poisonous, even deadly. This destructive cycle can be fed intentionally or subconsciously, and like the behaviour that fuels a Productive Efficacy Cycle, it is driven by an attempt to meet needs. When people are hungry, they will do what they need to do to get food. If people are starving for basic resources or a sense of belonging and acknowledgement, they will find a way to feed that hunger.

While in the ACCESS program, I did a student teaching practicum at the Manitoba Youth Centre, working with gang leaders. One of them told me, near the end of my time there, that he was “the guy they call.”

“Call for what?” I asked.

“The guy they call if they need a house shot up.” He leaned back in his chair with a small smile and an air of confidence, his hands behind his head. This young man (the one with photos of his son taped to his cell wall) had grown up in chaos

with an abusive and alcoholic single father. The boy’s need for respect, acknowledgement, and mastery were not met at home. So, he met those needs on the streets. Often, very risky behaviours are a misguided attempt to connect (however destructively).

If you put a frog in a pot of boiling water, it will jump out. If you put that same frog in a pot of cool water and let the water heat up gradually, that frog will get cooked. In the same way, both efficacy cycles are progressive. When we start living in a good way, things change gradually, and we adapt to that until it becomes the norm. One of my mentors used to prompt me to keep practicing new behaviours “until it becomes who you are, Lisa.” A Destructive Efficacy Cycle is also progressive, the behaviours leading to a gradual decay. People living within the cycle do not always see how far they

have gone until a breaking point is reached. It could be an illness, the loss of someone close to them, the loss of their sanity, or just being sick and tired of being sick and tired—anything that brings them to their knees. In this moment, a “sleeping giant” begins to stir and change becomes possible. The key is having resources and relationships available to meet with that decisive readiness. And although these elements carry the potential for reconstruction—if they come together in the right context—there are no promises on this path. The only certainty are the tiny moments of grace that will emerge.

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